

# Thomas Jefferson to Congress, February 10, 1807, Gun Boats, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

## SPECIAL MESSAGE ON GUNBOATS<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the preparation of this message, the President wrote to Dearborn and Smith:

"The H. of Representatives ask what particular ports are proposed to be furnished with gunboats, & how many to each. I give you a list of the ports, but instead of saying how many to each, I will throw them into groups, as below, & say how many boats to each group. Will you be so good as to state how many you would think necessary for each of the ports below mentd to give them a reasonable measure of protection in time of war? Also to strike out & insert ports in the list as you think best.

Misipi river

L. Pontchartrain

Mobille River

St. Mary's

Savanna

Beaufort

Charleston

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Cape Fear

Ocracock

Chesapeake Bay & waters

Delaware bay

New York

New London

Newport

Boston

Newburyport

Portsmouth

Portland

Kennebec

Penobscot

Passamaquoddy

February 10, 1807.

*To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States: —*

In compliance with the request of the House of Representatives, expressed in their resolution of the 5th instant, I proceed to give such information as is possessed, of the

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effect of gun-boats in the protection and defence of harbors, of the numbers thought necessary, and of the proposed distribution of them among the ports and harbors of the United States.

Under the present circumstances, and governed by the intentions of the legislature, as manifested by their annual appropriations of money for the purposes of defence, it has been concluded to combine—1st, land batteries, furnished with heavy cannon and mortars, and established on all the points around the place favorable for preventing vessels from lying before it; 2d, movable artillery which may be carried, as an occasion may require, to points unprovided with fixed batteries; 3d, floating batteries; and 4th, gun-boats, which may oppose an enemy at its entrance and co-operate with the batteries for his expulsion.

On this subject professional men were consulted as far as we had opportunity. General Wilkinson, and the late General Gates, gave their opinions in writing, in favor of the system, as will be

seen by their letters now communicated. The higher officers of the navy gave the same opinions in separate conferences, as their presence at the seat of government offered occasions of consulting them, and no difference of judgment appeared on the subjects. Those of Commodore Barron and Captain Tingey, now here, are recently furnished in writing, and transmitted herewith to the legislature.

The efficacy of gun-boats for the defence of harbors, and of other smooth and enclosed waters, may be estimated in part from that of galleys, formerly much used, but less powerful, more costly in their construction and maintenance, and requiring more men. But the gun-boat itself is believed to be in use with every modern maritime nation for the purpose of defence. In the Mediterranean, on which are several small powers, whose system like ours is peace and defence, few harbors are without this article of protection. Our own experience there of the effect of gun-boats for harbor service, is recent. Algiers

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is particularly known to have owed to a great provision of these vessels the safety of its city, since the epoch of their construction. Before that it had been repeatedly insulted and injured. The effect of gun-boats at present in the neighborhood of Gibraltar, is well known, and how much they were used both in the attack and defence of that place during a former war. The extensive resort to them by the two greatest naval powers in the world, on an enterprise of invasion not long since in prospect, shows their confidence in their efficacy for the purposes for which they are suited. By the northern powers of Europe, whose seas are particularly adapted to them, they are still more used. The remarkable action between the Russian flotilla of gun-boats and galleys, and a Turkish fleet of ships-of-the-line and frigates, in the Liman sea, 1788, will be readily recollected. The latter, commanded by their most celebrated admiral, were completely defeated, and several of their ships-of-the-line destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

1 The following, evidently prepared for some newspaper was written by Jefferson:

“Mr. Elliot in his speech on the subject of gunboats, inserted in the *National Intelligencer* of Dec. 30, quotes from the President's message of Feb. 10, 1807 the following passage ‘in the remarkable action between the Russian flotilla of gun-boats & gallies, and a Turkish fleet of ships of the line and frigates in the Liman sea in 1788, the latter, commanded by their most celebrated admiral, were completely defeated and several of their ships of the line destroyed’ he adds that he ‘has not only consulted the professed annals of the times, but has obtained some information from a writer who appears to have been personally acquainted with the scene of action’ & then he gives such an account of the action as may suit the scope of his argument, but not naming either ‘the professed annals’ or ‘the writer who seems to have been personally acquainted with the scene of action,’ so as to enable his hearers to question his account, it stands on his own personal authority only. Mr. Elliot's situation probably had not given him an opportunity of consulting the new annual register of 1789, which is certainly among ‘the professed annals of the times’ and the most respectable of them. The following account of the two actions in the Liman of the 19th & 28th of June 1788, is copied verbally from that work, pa. 70 ‘a fleet of an inferior

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sort &c—in which they had placed themselves.’ § in the Leyden gazettes of Aug. 1, 22 & 28, 1788. the reader will find official and more detailed accounts of these two actions from these authorities. Taken together it appears that the Turkish force was 16 ships of the line 9 frigates and many smaller vessels. The Russian force 4 ships of the line, some frigates & galleys (under which denomination they include gunboats) making 27 in all. in the 1st action of June 19th the small vessels on both sides alone engaged, the Turks were defeated & having lost 4 of their number the residue retired under the protection of their ships of the line. That in the 2d action of the 28th. the Turkish admiral carded his large as well as small vessels into the Liman sea or lake. the Russians had in the meantime been reinforced by 22 gunboats carrying an 18 pounder each. The result was by the annual register 9 vessels ships of the line & frigates taken or destroyed & by the Leyden account 16. The remainder of the Turkish fleet, the large as well as small vessels, retreating under shelter of the walls of Ocrakow. It does not appear in either account that any part of the Russian force was ever engaged but the flotilla of small vessels which were almost entirely gallies & gunboats, and in the second and decisive action were arranged in two lines in the form of a crescent. The reader will now judge for himself whether the statement in the message of Feb. 10. is not a fair summary of these accounts and whether it be true as Mr. Elliot has said that ‘it appears that no such battle as that described in the message of Feb. 10 ever happened.’”

From the opinions given as to the number of gunboats necessary for some of the principal seaports, and from a view of all the towns and ports from Orleans to Maine inclusive, entitled to protection, in proportion to their situation and circumstances, it is concluded, that to give them a due measure of protection in time of war, about two hundred gun-boats will be requisite. According to first ideas, the following would be their general distribution,

liable to be varied on more mature examination, and as circumstances shall vary, that is to say:—

To the Mississippi and its neighboring waters, forty gun-boats.

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To Savannah and Charleston, and the harbors on each side, from St. Mary's to Currituck, twenty-five.

To the Chesapeake and its waters, twenty.

To Delaware bay and river, fifteen.

To New York, the Sound, and waters as far as Cape Cod, fifty.

To Boston and the harbors north of Cape Cod, fifty.

The flotilla assigned to these several stations, might each be under the care of a particular commandant, and the vessels composing them would, in ordinary, be distributed among the harbors within the station in proportion to their importance.

Of these boats a proper proportion would be of the larger size, such as those heretofore built, capable of navigating any seas, and of reinforcing occasionally the strength of even the most distant port when menaced with danger. The residue would be confined to their own or the neighboring harbors, would be smaller, less furnished for accommodation, and consequently less costly. Of the number supposed necessary, seventy-three are built or building, and the hundred and twenty-seven still to be provided, would cost from five to six hundred thousand dollars. Having regard to the convenience of the treasury, as well as to the resources of building, it has been thought that one half of these might be built in the present year, and the other half the next. With the legislature, however, it will rest to stop where we are, or at any further point, when they shall be of opinion that the number provided shall be sufficient for the object.

At times when Europe as well as the United States shall be at peace, it would not be proposed that more than six or eight of these vessels should

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be kept afloat. When Europe is in war, treble that number might be necessary to be distributed among those particular harbors which foreign vessels of war are in the habit of frequenting, for the purpose of preserving order therein.

But they would be manned, in ordinary, with only their complement for navigation, relying on the seamen and militia of the port if called into action on sudden emergency. It would be only when the United States should themselves be at war, that the whole number would be brought into actual service, and would be ready in the first moments of the war to co-operate with other means for covering at once the line of our seaports. At all times, those unemployed would be withdrawn into places not exposed to sudden enterprise, hauled up under sheds from the sun and weather, and kept in preservation with little expense for repairs or maintenance.

It must be superfluous to observe, that this species of naval armament is proposed merely for defensive operation; that it can have but little effect toward protecting our commerce in the open seas even on our coast; and still less can it become an excitement to engage in offensive maritime war, toward which it would furnish no means.<sup>1</sup>

1 On the draft of this message, Gallatin wrote the following notes:

“MESSAGE RESPECTING GUNBOATS.

“2d Paragraph. Might not this be altogether omitted? It is true that the resolution of the House has arisen from the debate on fortifications vs. gunboats. But as it does ask information only on the last subject, it is not necessary to allude to the other subject: such allusion will be construed as taking sides against N. York fortifications: and the expression of that opinion of the President is necessary neither to prevent too large a fortification appropn, nor to shew the efficiency of gunboats. On the contrary, the third paragraph with some trifling alterations in its introduction would present the whole system contemplated by the Executive (which in fact embraced, under the name of land batteries, a species

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of fortifications), without giving offence, or interfering with the question of permanent & detached fortifications. It may be added that Castle William reg. Mud Island, Fort Johnson, and, even the works now going on on Governor's Island must be considered as regular fortifications, not properly embraced under the designations of land batteries, and from their insular & detached situation to be necessarily manned by a standing military force.

"5th Paragraph. Omit or modify the words 'inhabited by &c. whose system like ours is peace & defence': Otherwise Algiers will be stated as having a system of peace & defence exclusively.

"Omit the sentence already pencilled relating to our squadron; it is not I think altogether correct in point of fact; we wanted gunboats there to attack theirs in shallow water & even to attack their batteries; but our frigates never avoided them; for their ground (of the frigates) was on the high seas where the Tripolitan boats dared not come.

"To gunboats properly so called I do not think that the British have much resorted in the channel; but they did under Curtis in completing the destruction of the floating batteries at Gibraltar: It is well known that during that long siege, they found it indispensable to have such an armament to meet a similar enemies force. The Swedes & Russians have used them to a greater extent than any other nation. The most splendid achievement by gunboats was the destruction (on the 28th & 29th June 1788) of a great part of the Turkish fleet under their celebrated capitan Pacha Hassan Aly, in the Liman or mouth of the Dnieper by the Russian flotilla under Prince of Nassau. Nassau had twenty-two one gunboats and 27 galleys. Hassan attacked him; in order to force the passage and besiege Kimburn, with 16 ships of the line & several frigates, & lost nine of his ships.

"The latter part of this paragraph commencing with the words 'and indeed' to the end, might be omitted.

"7th Paragraph. '& the 127 &c would cost from 5 to 600 thd dollars.' Query whether any gunboats fit for sea including rigging guns &c. have actually been built for less than five

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thousand dollars; and whether it be intended that they should all be built of a size that will cost no more? Are also the appropriations already made sufficient to compleat the first 73? For the idea conveyed is that less than 600 thd dollars will complete the whole number of 200. If there be any uncertainty on that point, such modification in the expressions should be made as will avoid a premature commitment.

“Having regard &c. it has been thought that  $\frac{1}{2}$  might be built this year & the other half the next.’ I am clearly of opinion that we ought to build now all those that are wanted for the Mississippi, & also that number which it may be thought proper to keep afloat in time of European war in the other ports. The number for the Mississippi is stated in the message at 40: that to be kept afloat generally in time of European war is stated in the 8th paragraph at 24 at most. This makes at the utmost 64; and there are already 73 building, it does not seem to me that there is any necessity to build beforehand any greater number for the others are expressly stated in the message to be wanted only in case the U. States are at war. If any length of time was necessary to build such vessels, it might be proper to be at all times prepared with the whole number wanted. But of all the species of force which war may require, armies ships of war fortifications, & gunboats, there is none which can be obtained in a shorter time than gunboats, & none therefore that it is less necessary to provide beforehand. I think that within sixty days, perhaps half the time, each of the seaports of Boston, New York, Philada & Baltimore might build & fit out thirty; and the smaller ports together as many; especially if the timber was prepared beforehand: But beyond that preparation I would not go: for exclusively of the first expense of building & the interest of capital thus laid out, I apprehend that notwithstanding the care which may be taken they will infallibly decay in a given number of years & will be a perpetual bill of costs for repairs and maintenance. Sheds will be of use provided the boats are built & not launched; but if once in the water they must share the fate of all other vessels whether public or private. It will be an economical measure for every naval station to burn their navy at the end of a war, & to build a new one when again at war, if it was not that time is necessary to build ships of war. The principle is the same as to gunboats; and the

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objection of time necessary to build does not exist. I also think that in this as in everything else connected with a navy & naval departments, the annual expense of maintenance will far exceed what is estimated; and I would not be in the least astonished, if supposing two hundred gunboats were actually built, it should add half a million dollars a year to our annual expenses for the support of that establishment. I would therefore suggest that the latter part of this paragraph which contemplates the building of 123 in 2 years should be omitted: and at the end of the 8th paragraph to omit also the words 'without the expense for repairs or maintenance,' and to insert the substance of that part of the 7th paragraph which submits the question to the legislature, but with a modification so as to read in substance; with the legislature it will rest to decide on the number sufficient for the 'object & the time of building.'"

Indorsed "recd Feb. 8th 07."